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DEPT FOR NEA/FO AND NEA/ELA  
ALSO FOR IO A/S HOOK, PDAS WARLICK  
P FOR DRUSSELL, RRANGASWAMY  
USUN FOR KHALILZAD/WOLFF/SCHEDLBAUER/GERMAIN  
NSC FOR ABRAMS/YERGER/MCDERMOTT/RAMCHAND

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [SY](#) [LE](#)  
SUBJECT: LEBANON: HIZBALLAH NOT INCLINED TO STRIKE ISRAEL  
NOW, OBSERVERS SAY

REF: A. BEIRUT 1806  
[1](#)B. 08 BEIRUT 237

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. William K. Grant for reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

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[1](#)1. (C) Could the current confrontation between Israel and Hamas in Gaza motivate Hizballah to provoke a second conflict against Israel on the Israeli-Lebanese border? The consensus of several observers we have spoken to in recent days is no. Domestically, Hizballah benefits from its current strong support for Palestinian "resistance" and has little to gain from escalating that to a renewed conflict with Israel. With Lebanese parliamentary elections on June 7, and Israeli elections only a month away, there is an argument to be made that Hizballah calculates that a military response would risk undermining its support at the polls in Lebanon and strengthening the prospect of hard-liners winning in Israel. Compared to 2006, Hizballah's operational room for maneuver is more constrained following the adoption of UNSCR 1701, which led to an increased UNIFIL presence and deployment of the Lebanese Armed Forces in the south and increased scrutiny of arms smuggling from Syria. In our view, Hizballah also does not want to be accused of violating UNSCR 1701 absent an Israeli attack. Ultimately, however, Hizballah's role in the current conflict may be determined by the agenda of regional actors such as Iran, Syria, and Israel itself. The situation in southern Lebanon remains relatively calm, more so than was the case, for example, following the February 2008 assassination of Hizballah official Mughniyeh in Damascus. End summary.

TOUGH TALK UNLIKELY TO  
TRANSLATE INTO ACTION  
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[1](#)2. (C) Since the Gaza crisis began, Hizballah leaders have strongly condemned Israel's attacks on Gaza and Egypt's refusal to open the Rafah border crossing in an effort to rally support for Hamas, undermine U.S. allies in the region, and reinforce Hizballah's own resistance role in Lebanon. SYG Hassan Nasrallah, Deputy SYG Naim Qasim, and Foreign Relations official Nawwaf al-Musawi, expressing their solidarity with the Palestinians in Gaza, have all urged

resistance against the "Israeli and U.S. aggressors" but refrained from committing Hizballah to any action. In his January 7 speech marking the end of Ashoura, Nasrallah called on Arabs to help the Palestinian resistance fight Israel, declaring that Israel could "get rid of neither Hamas nor Hizballah." Nasrallah also asserted Hizballah's right to resist Israel, warning that if Israel took any action against Lebanon, "the 2006 war will seem but a stroll." Sheikh Nabil Qawouk, a Hizballah official in south Lebanon, said the party was "cautious and alert" in response to what it said were Israeli troop deployments along the Lebanese border and that it was ready to face an eventual attack.

13. (C) Our conversations with a number of observers, including GOL officials and some who meet with Hizballah such as the staff of the UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon (UNSCOL) indicate that Hizballah is not preparing to translate its tough rhetoric into action against Israel. Hizballah has been on its best behavior following its aggression in May 2008 and is unlikely to risk any actions (especially for Palestinians in Gaza) that could undermine the current level of popular support it enjoys in Lebanon. Hizballah probably is unwilling at this time to risk incurring the blame for initiating a conflict, especially with parliamentary elections only a few months away (June 7).

Following the 2006 war, Nasrallah publicly stated that, had he foreseen the level of destruction Israel imposed on Lebanon, he would have acted differently (although any blame attributed to Hizballah by the Lebanese for starting the conflict has faded over time). In recent months, however, Israel has warned that it would retaliate against all of

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Lebanon in the event of a new attack, a price Hizballah probably is unwilling to pay. The majority of Lebanese, and especially the Shia in the south, still recovering from the 2006 war, have no appetite for a new conflict, and Hizballah probably would find it more difficult to escape the blame for starting a second war. Furthermore, by refraining from threatening its own action against Israel, Hizballah can blame Israel for any conflict in Lebanon.

14. (C) Defense Minister Elias Murr commented in press statements that Hizballah was remaining calm, realizing that another conflict with Israel would lead to Lebanon's destruction. Foreign Minister Salloukh (an ally of Amal leader Nabih Berri), convening P5 Chiefs of Mission on January 2, said Lebanon was committed to keeping calm on the border and did not want to give Israel an excuse to attack. He further added that Hizballah was being cautious and did not want to start a conflict. Social Affairs Minister Mario Aoun, a member of Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement, called a confrontation with Israel unlikely, adding that any steps to "reinforce" Lebanon should take place through UNSCR 1701. Druze MP Marwan Hamadeh, in a January 5 interview on Voice of Lebanon, called the Israeli deployment a "precaution" against a possible attack from Hizballah, adding that no one in Lebanon wanted to open a front against Israel in violation of UNSCR 1701 and that French President Sarkozy had warned the Syrians not to go this route during his January 6 visit to Damascus and Beirut.

PROFITING POLITICALLY FROM  
PERCEIVED ISRAELI AGGRESSION  
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15. (C) Many observers view Hizballah's restraint as a cost-free strategy to boost its own popularity domestically. Without having to actually take up arms in defense of the Palestinians in Gaza, but praising Gaza's "resistance", Hizballah once again lends credibility to its own "resistance" as the only entity capable of standing up to Israeli aggression. Ghattas Khoury, advisor to majority leader Saad Hariri, told Charge January 2 that Israeli aggression against the Palestinians was bolstering support for Hizballah and is ally Aoun in Lebanon. As in Hizballah's

2006 war against Israel, Hamas would be victorious by merely outlasting Israel's attacks, he said, reinforcing the appeal of "resistance" in Lebanon.

¶16. (C) Two senior staff of the office of the UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon, which meets with Hizballah regularly, told Charge January 6 that, in UNSCOL's assessment, it was unlikely Hizballah would attempt any action against Israel because it currently enjoys widespread approval in Lebanon and does not gain anything by opening another front. The staffers noted that Hizballah does not believe it can defeat Israel militarily, and that its standing in the Arab world currently is at a peak. However, he did not rule out a Hizballah reaction to Israeli overflights, noting that Hizballah continued to raise this issue with UNSCOL. Both Hizballah and Amal would emerge with a propaganda victory from the events in Gaza, the UNSCOL staffers predicted, barring total destruction of Hamas or the reoccupation of Gaza.

¶17. (C) Hizballah probably also has an eye on the upcoming election in Israel. The 2006 war occurred just months after Kadima won parliamentary elections in Israel. Now, a month before the Israeli elections, Hizballah may be reluctant to undertake any action that would increase support for the more hard-line Netanyahu to return to power.

MORE LIMITED ROOM  
FOR MANEUVER  
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¶18. (C) Operationally, Hizballah is more constrained than it was in 2006, following the adoption of UNSCR 1701. The presence of an enhanced UNIFIL contingent and LAF troops in south Lebanon restrict Hizballah's ability to launch attacks from south of the Litani, although Hizballah is believed to

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have reinforced its arsenal north of the Litani, including longer range missiles capable of reaching Israeli targets. Furthermore, although the GOL continues to complain about arms smuggling, unlike in 2006, Hizballah will find it more difficult to obtain reinforcements from Syria. Politically, Hizballah probably is reluctant to openly violate UNSCR 1701 without Israeli provocation.

¶19. (C) Hariri's advisor Khoury contends that President Sleiman, unlike his Syrian-picked predecessor, would not turn a blind eye to efforts to smuggle weapons from Syria, limiting Hizballah's ability to engage in a long campaign. He praised Sleiman's trip to south Lebanon following the December 25 discovery of eight Katushya rockets (Ref A), where the President stressed Lebanon's commitment to UNSCR ¶1701.

IRAN, ISRAEL, SYRIA  
AND OTHER WILD CARDS  
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¶10. (C) Ultimately, the decision whether to open a second front against Israel may not be up to Hizballah. The biggest risk is that Iran, fearing a Hamas defeat in Gaza, could decide to play the Hizballah card to open up a second front against Israel. Most observers, however, believe Iran is saving this option for a greater eventuality, such as an Israeli attack against Iran, in which case Hizballah would find it difficult to refuse an Iranian directive to act. UNSCOL Chief of Staff Jack Christofedes told Charge January 6 that Iran is unlikely to want to see the weapons it has sent to Hizballah to be used "in just any situation," preferring to save them for a "major" rather than "surgical" strike. Visiting Secretary of the Iranian National Security Council Saeed Jalili, meeting with Nasrallah, President Sleiman, and Speaker Nabih Berri, repeatedly stressed Iran's support for diplomatic efforts to resolve the crisis.

¶11. (C) Another risk is that Israel, already publicly preparing itself for a possible attack from the north, could be provoked into launching an attack, as it was in 2006, following Hizballah's kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers. Such a provocation would not need Hizballah's fingerprints, raising the possibility of unknown instigators inadvertently or deliberately sparking hostilities. UNSCOL official Christofedes, noting that the perpetrators of the Katushya rocket incident remain unknown, warned that a non-Hizballah actor in southern Lebanon could initiate action against Israel out of solidarity with the Palestinians. However, the Palestinians in Lebanon were "on the short end of a Syrian string," he said, and would not act without Syrian direction, adding that the Syrian response so far had been restrained. Khoury agreed that Syria is on good behavior, hoping for an entente with the U.S. and a resumption of indirect negotiations with Israel. It, too, is adopting a wait and see attitude rather than pushing for Hizballah action at this time, he said.

SOUTH CALM BUT TENSE  
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¶12. (C) According to LAF and UNIFIL contacts, the situation in south Lebanon remains calm but tense. UNIFIL and the LAF stepped up patrols in the wake of the December 25 discovery of eight Katushya rockets, but contend their biggest concern is the possibility of rogue actors firing rockets into Israel or other violations of UNSCR 1701. The situation in the Palestinian camps remains quiet. Unlike the Mughnieh assassination in February 2008 (Ref B), which prompted many Lebanese in the south to apply for passports and/or seek accommodations north of the Litani in preparation for a mass exodus, we have seen no evidence that residents in the south are expecting a new conflict with Israel.

¶13. (C) Christofedes reported that Hizballah went on full alert in response to Israel's increased activity along the Lebanese border, warning Israel against hostile actions. Hizballah officials told UNSCOL that they had communicated this message to the Israeli Defense Force (IDF), Christofedes

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said, adding that he viewed this coordination with the IDF as an indication of Hizballah's desire to maintain the calm.

ATTACKS AGAINST  
EGYPT MISFIRE?  
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¶14. (C) Nasrallah's attacks against Egypt, in which he criticized the army generals' failure to intervene and called for a popular insurrection against the Mubarak regime to protest the Rafah closure, received mixed reviews in Lebanon. Many viewed them as miscalculated; Sunnis opposed the attack against a Sunni regime, while others criticized Hizballah for equating Egypt with Israel and instigating conflict between Arabs instead of Arabs and Israelis. President Sleiman sent an official apology to President Mubarak for anti-Egypt demonstrations in Lebanon (which have occurred virtually daily since the fighting began).

GRANT